

A Gilded Age, A Gilded Man: How P.T. Barnum Transformed the Circus in the Gilded Age

Erin Michelle Weber

The Gilded Age was a period of immense change. America redefined leisure as new commodities and amusements arose. One such amusement, the circus, became an important part of life, not just as a way to pass the time, but as a strong social and economic phenomenon. There was money to be made for those who could best figure out how draw people together. Phineas Taylor Barnum was the driving force behind the greatness of the circus in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was truly the first to bring together many elements of various performances, including minstrel shows, menageries, vaudeville, and his signature element, the freak show. Barnum carefully constructed his image around these grand shows; he was fully aware of what his audiences wanted to see, and he would give it to them no matter the ethical implications. Barnum was equally able to draw audiences to his show and to his flashy, dramatic character. Newspaper accounts and Barnum's memoir provided insight to what his professional and personal lives looked like, and how he and America merged the two. Through keen advertising, business savvy, and showmanship, P.T. Barnum transformed himself into a circus phenomenon that paralleled the spectacle of the Gilded Age.

The Gilded Age brought new and exciting change to America in all aspects of life. Business, technology, and industrialization evolved rapidly, but perhaps no change was more important to the hearts of the American people than the pursuit of leisure. People were determined to have a good time, and one of the most popular ways to spend one's hard-earned paycheck was a ticket to the circus. While the circus displayed a public, gilded veneer, much like the Gilded Age itself, this beautiful layer covered much of the heartbreak, struggle, and amoral attitude pervasive throughout the age. P.T. Barnum created a circus empire built on these principles. He used his advertising, business savvy, and showmanship to transform himself into a circus phenomenon that corresponded to the spectacle of the Gilded Age.

The circus arose from a variety of amusements in the United States. Vaudeville, minstrel shows, equestrian shows, and traveling menageries all contributed to what became the modern circus. Vaudeville and minstrel shows combined acting, singing, dancing, and theatricality into a glamorous and outlandish performance. Equestrian performances and traveling menageries exhibited rare animals, and audiences enjoyed the opportunity to see something so exotic. Equestrian shows also used daring feats; it excited the audience to see people ride bareback or perform gymnastic tricks on a horse. Over time, these various types of shows eventually merged into one entity: the circus.

Menageries were the most obvious frontrunner to the circus because they traveled up and down the eastern seaboard. By 1820, there were over thirty traveling menageries in the eastern United States.¹ Around this time, showmen recognized that they could increase ticket sales if interesting or dangerous acts were interspersed with the animals. At first these performances included animals, such as lion tamers or dog trainers, but soon many did not involve animals at all, and before long, menageries and circuses presented nearly identical entertainment.² Menageries set a precedent for a traveling show, and this idea was important to what the circus would become.

Circus proprietors, like most other businesses in the Gilded Age, benefitted from the importance of cities. With so many people, urban labor and transportation costs were low. Most cities had a large, open field that made it easy to transport and set up equipment. This space was usually near a railroad station, and it was convenient when circuses took to the rails. Circuses were good for all businesses in the city because people from miles around came to the city on Circus Day to buy everything from cloth to candy. This “consumerism, as much as an interest in tented amusement, brought big crowds to town on Circus Day,” and both the circus and local businesses profited.³ In addition, there were few other sources of entertainment with which to contend. When the circus came to town, anyone with enough money for a ticket went to this exciting event.

Circuses also have a long history of creative innovation. In the circus, any new idea was exciting, in both performances and in business practices. In 1825, Joshua Purdy Brown instituted a particularly important advancement when he placed his small circus under a tent.⁴ This allowed spectators to enjoy the show in all weather; it kept the sun off people on a hot day and sheltered them from rain. Barnum later improved on this design by using not only one tent but three. The addition of clowns was another important innovation. These clowns added an air of lightheartedness to the grandeur. John Culhane claims in *The American Circus* that the circus was not truly formed until clowns were introduced, and their buffoonery, coupled with daring feats, helped to define the early circus.⁵

Clowns were also important because they helped pioneer circus advertising. A clown travelled ahead of the circus and announced the show with jokes, acrobatics, and flyers. Their garish garb and bright makeup made clowns one of the most visibly recognizable aspects of the circus, and their mere presence built excitement. Clowns were the original poster hangers. A few days before a circus came to town, it “might be covered with 5000 to 8000” flyers.⁶ This number doubled if two circuses passed through around the same time. Circus owners tried to outdo each other, often papering over other circus advertisements. These advertisements covered shop windows and public spaces, and they featured bold, bright lines and exciting text that could be read from far away. Though circuses used advertising techniques long before Barnum, he created new techniques and spent large sums of money on advertising; he used the foundation of others’ publicity to build his empire.

¹ John Culhane, *The American Circus* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990).

² Culhane, *The American Circus*, 17.

³ Gregory J. Renoff, *The Big Tent* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 70.

⁴ Culhane, *The American Circus*, 17.

⁵ Culhane, *The American Circus*, 164.

⁶ Culhane, *The American Circus*, 164.

While all of these elements were growing together to form the modern circus in the early 19th century, Barnum was growing up. Phineas Taylor Barnum was born on July 5, 1810, and from a young age, Barnum “had an early penchant for accumulating money” and possessed strong arithmetic skills.⁷ His parents were middle class and he was well-off throughout most of his early childhood, although Barnum liked to maintain his story was one of rags-to-riches. His father died when he was fifteen, leaving Barnum with a mother and four younger siblings to support. Barnum began working at a general store; soon after, he opened one of his own. He was arrested for libel three times and jailed on the last arrest; it was through these libel cases that Barnum “found out he rather enjoyed notoriety.”⁸ From the beginning, Barnum was no ordinary man.

Barnum discovered early on that he had a penchant for transforming his money into great wealth. In 1835, Barnum purchased his first curiosity “that would launch his career in show business and provide the nascent mass media one of its first great spectacles.”⁹ This first curiosity was Joice Heth, the alleged 161 year old black nurse to George Washington. Barnum toured her around New England; his advertisement for her in *The New York Sun* billed her as “the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the world.”¹⁰ Even in her death Barnum saw opportunity, charging fifty cents a head to see the autopsy that proved she was probably no more than eighty years old. Barnum saw no harm in this exaggerated marketing because half the fun for spectators was trying to determine Joice Heth’s real age. Though he used exaggeration, Barnum did not want to be seen as a fraud, and he maintained that that he “had hired Joice in perfect good faith, and relied upon her appearance and the documents as evidence of the truth of her story.”¹¹ This statement allowed Barnum to claim the fun of humbug and still come off as a respectable businessman because he was humbugged by another.

With Joice Heth’s success, Barnum unlocked the secret that propelled him to fame. The public loved abnormalities and Barnum used the freak show to make his mark, not only on the circus but on American culture.¹² The idea of the freak show propelled Barnum to open his *American Museum* in 1842. This museum, located in downtown New York City, housed several people and animals with deformities or other unique characteristics. One such oddity was the Feejee Mermaid. Barnum distributed 10,000 flyers that described the mermaid, but made no mention of his own name in case the public grew angry and demanded their money back.¹³ In these flyers, Barnum showed pictures of stereotypically beautiful, bare-breasted mermaids, but the actual creature he displayed was a monkey sewn onto a large fish. Though “the public expected far more than they received . . . lines were long and Barnum’s monthly profits more than doubled the first month that the mermaid was on exhibit.”¹⁴ *Think Public Relations* says, “Barnum clearly recognized the power of audience participation . . . many people were willing to pay admission to see obvious hoaxes . . . because they enjoyed the process of exposing the ‘humbugger’ to

⁷ William Eckley, *The American Circus* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 5.

⁸ Culhane, *The American Circus*, 29.

⁹ Benjamin Reiss, “P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth and Antebellum Spectacles of Race,” *American Quarterly* (1999), Muse, 77.

¹⁰ Reiss, *Joice Heth*, 81.

¹¹ P.T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum* (New York: Leggatt Brothers, 1855), 172.

¹² Throughout this paper, people with physical deformities or handicaps will be referred to as ‘freaks’ or ‘oddities’. These terms are not meant to offend but to stay true to the terminology of Barnum’s day.

¹³ Steven C. Levi, “P. T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid,” *Western Folklore* (1977), 151.

¹⁴ Levi, *Feejee Mermaid*, 151.

their presumable less sophisticated companions.”¹⁵ Hoaxes were just as profitable as genuine freaks, but only if used sparingly enough to still be interesting. Barnum showed many other creatures similar to the Feejee mermaid, some real and some fake. In his autobiography, he frankly summed up his feelings about his hoaxes:

If I have exhibited a questionable dead mermaid in my Museum, it should not be overlooked that I have also exhibited cameleopards [sic], a rhinoceros, grisly [sic] bears, orang-outangs [sic], great serpents, etc. . . . and I should hope that a little ‘clap-trap’ occasionally, in the way of transparencies, flags, exaggerated pictures, and puffing advertisements, might find an offset in a wilderness of wonderful, instructive, and amusing realities.¹⁶

Barnum’s early years were profitable, but he suffered a number of misfortunes that forced him out of the entertainment industry for a time. With the first version of his autobiography, published in 1855, the public believed his willingness to put on a show marked him as a hustler, a cheat, and a villain. Terence Whalen, who wrote the introduction to a newer edition of Barnum’s autobiography, stated the public was “uneasy about Barnum’s disregard for the autobiographical conventions of remorse and repentance.”¹⁷ Barnum refused to pander to the cultural expectations of businessmen, but he revised later editions of his autobiography to calm some of the language. Later in 1855, Barnum was involved in a scandal with the Jerome Clock Company. Barnum loaned the company large sums of money, but the company was unable to repay these loans. Barnum’s name was left with the blame, and he owed over five hundred thousand dollars when this scandal was over. In 1865, shortly after Barnum began to recover from this near financial ruin, the *American Museum* caught fire and burned down, and Barnum lost nearly everything that was inside. After this tragic fire, Barnum’s money-making days appeared to be over.¹⁸

With his museum and prized collections gone, Barnum spent several years away from business. It seemed Barnum was finished with show business forever; however, the ability to use his talents to create profits was too much for Barnum to resist. In 1871, William Cameron Coup approached Barnum and convinced him to reenter the entertainment industry. Coup planned to start a circus, but he needed Barnum’s experience and expertise to make it a success. Coup maintained the partnership was originally his idea, but Barnum always claimed it was his. Barnum demonstrated his business skills from the very beginning of this partnership; he orchestrated a deal where he received two-thirds of the profits. Coup agreed to the plan because Barnum agreed to fund the entire project, further demonstrating his willingness to spend money to make money. In addition, Barnum’s name was the only one to be billed. When Coup agreed to this plan, “P.T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Circus” was born, the largest circus of its day.¹⁹

Though Barnum’s attractions were remarkable, his keen sense of advertising brought his greatest success. Barnum wholeheartedly believed one had to spend money to make money. One of his

¹⁵ Dennis L. Wilcox et al., *Think Public Relations* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2013), 154.

¹⁶ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 255.

¹⁷ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, xxv.

¹⁸ Eckley, *The American Circus*.

¹⁹ Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America’s Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 222.

concluding remarks in his autobiography was “whatever your occupation or calling may be, if it needs support from the public, advertise it thoroughly and efficiently.”²⁰ His advertising ideas were long-sighted; he intended to “sow first and reap afterward.”²¹ In the first year of his circus, Barnum planned to use all of his profits for marketing the new enterprise. At four hundred thousand dollars, the first-year profits far exceeded expectations, and Barnum did not manage to use all of the money for advertising.²² Even so, the money he spent on advertising was unlike any business venture before.

As the primary mode of disseminating information, newspapers cannot be underestimated in Barnum’s rise to advertising success. Newspapers were a moderately cheap, widespread way to promote the circus. In April of 1877, Barnum’s circus came to New York City, and he ran ads prior to and during the circus run. Barnum aimed to demonstrate to his audience just how valuable his collection was; many of the ads mentioned “\$500,000 worth of Foreign Features added.”²³ Barnum juxtaposed this great expenditure on his part to the reasonable ticket prices. Tickets ranged from twenty-five to seventy-five cents, depending on the location of the seats. For comparison, the cheapest seats in the gallery cost twenty-five cents, the same as a quart of ice cream at a local parlor. Many of the ads also said, “prices reduced to suit all classes”; the text was in all caps to further emphasize Barnum cared for his audience, or wanted to give the illusion he did.²⁴ At the end of his autobiography, Barnum wrote he would not recap all “the benefits I have conferred on my countrymen and countrywomen, as a minister to their instruction and happiness, while pursuing my main purpose of making money.”²⁵ Barnum sought both his customers’ happiness and profits. As long as it continued to be beneficial to him, Barnum was content to give each customer more than his money’s worth.

In these newspaper advertisements, Barnum used his powerful writing skills to create strong language intended to attract people to his show. His specimens were not freaks but “marvelous Human Prodigies.” He was not simply applauded, but received “continued and rapturous ovations.” He proclaimed himself the “Monarch of all Showman [sic],” determined to provide “the largest, finest, rarest and best menagerie, museum, and circus in the world.” Barnum wrote many of his own ads, and he carefully selected each word to promote his circus. Barnum also recognized the importance of attending to his audience’s concerns; throughout the month of April, Barnum included many notices responding to problems. In one of these notices, he encouraged people to attend the less-crowded afternoon show because it was “more comfortable for Ladies and Children.” In another, Barnum explained his show would soon take to the rails and people had only a few more opportunities to see it in New York. The ads changed over the course of the month, from “Grand and imposing street procession to-day” on April 7, to “P.T. Barnum’s last week!” the latter in bolder, bigger, capitalized typeface. The people rarely read the same ad twice.²⁶

²⁰ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 396.

²¹ Eckley, *The American Circus*, 9.

²² Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 222.

²³ *New York Times*, April 1877.

²⁴ *New York Times*, April 1877.

²⁵ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 400.

²⁶ *New York Times*, April 1877.

In addition to newsprint, Barnum utilized advertising techniques such as pamphlets and billboards. These pamphlets were similar to other circus flyers of the day; with bold colors and clean lines, they called attention to an attraction that simply could not be ignored. In Newport, Rhode Island, Barnum placed seventy sheets of twenty-eight by forty-two inch paper together to create a huge advertisement. In effect, this “was the world’s first billboard.”²⁷ Bigger was always better, and Barnum employed many full-time poster hangers to put up flyers anywhere and everywhere. Alan Rosenspan states in “The Greatest Marketer on Earth!” that “when he took his circus to London, he shipped 16,000 pounds of posters, and 38 full-time uniformed hangers with him.”²⁸ By making his ads so abundant, Barnum hoped people would attend his shows just to see what all the fuss was about.

Barnum is recognized “as a driving force in creating mass popular culture in America.”²⁹ He made sure people knew his name not only for his show, but for the intense marketing that went into that show. *Think Public Relations* says Barnum was the master of “the *pseudoevent* – a planned happening that occurs primarily for the purpose of being reported.”³⁰ This book goes on to state Barnum was a master of “hype”; using mass media to circulate misleading or embellished information with the sole intent of catching the public’s attention.³¹ In addition to promoting his circus, Barnum’s advertising techniques helped create the idea of mass media and popular culture.

Barnum’s advertising skills are a small example of his larger sense of business savvy. He had an aptitude for attracting people to his show and satisfying them so they returned and spread the word. Barnum demonstrated this business savvy in several ways. He pioneered the use of the railroads, responded to his audience’s concerns, and played off the racist ideology prevalent in the Gilded Age. Arguably the most important aspect of his business savvy was his recognition of his own limitations. He knew when cooperation was healthier than competition, as demonstrated in the Bailey merger. Though not always ethical, every business move he made benefited him and his circus in some way.

Railroads were changing both American geography and culture, and as Barnum believed in modernizing as quickly as possible, he became the first circus man to put his show on rails in 1872.³² This made it quicker and easier to transport the circus from place to place. People in Iowa City could see the circus one day, and people in Des Moines could see it the next. Before the use of railways, circuses traveled across the country in large wagons. Barnum used these same wagons but devised a system to put them on flat train cars. Though Barnum originally used commercial railways, he soon operated his own circus line. Railways were faster and helped Barnum bring his show to more people across the United States.

Barnum stood apart from most other business tycoons of the Gilded Age because he not only listened to audience concerns, he responded to them. Though Barnum’s circus was a smash hit with most people, some did not find it so amusing. Many religious people saw the circus as a

²⁷ Alan Rosenspan, “The Greatest Marketer on Earth!” *Direct Marketing* 62, no 11 (2000), Academic One File, 39.

²⁸ Rosenspan, “Greatest Marketer”, 39.

²⁹ Andrew Curry, “King of Humbug,” *U.S. News and World Report* 131, no 9 (2001), Business Source Premier, 49.

³⁰ Wilcox, *Think Public Relations*, 46.

³¹ Wilcox, *Think Public Relations*, 53.

³² Renoff, *The Big Tent*, 58.

vulgar sin, and while their voices were largely drowned out by the masses who adored the circus, Barnum responded to these religious concerns anyway. He assured “patrons that [the] troupe would perform an entertainment free of vulgarisms.”³³ He also made adjustments to the circus layout, instituting a three tent system that allowed people to avoid those acts they deemed too vulgar. They could see the menagerie and exhibits in the first two tents and bypass the performances in the third. He promised his religious patrons they were not sinning because the exhibits were educational, and he “pledged that his circus would present ‘rational, moral, and instructive entertainment to the public to make it subservient to Christianity and enlightenment.’”³⁴

Barnum addressed many of these same concerns in regards to the respectability of women. Many worried the circus was not safe for the more delicate sex. In addition to the concessions he granted to the circus’ religious visitors, Barnum created a haven for women and children in the hippodrome. Many people who came to the circus believed the hippodrome was less exciting, and it was usually less crowded.³⁵ Barnum also employed many female performers; he sought to present them as respectable members of society at all times. Even if he could not adequately address the concerns, Barnum was determined to make his show too irresistible to miss, so that every man would attend it and resolve and concerns for himself.

Though Barnum instituted this three-tent system partly as a response to his audience’s concerns, he understood it had other benefits as well. These benefits included such things as increased traffic flow and the ability to accommodate more people. It also ensured a patron could not view everything at once and would want to return. Barnum mentioned the importance of return visitors, saying “we depend upon American visitors, upon the people who visit it, not once, but half a dozen or a score of times, and pay their admission each time.”³⁶ Barnum was one of the first to institute the three tent system; others soon copied it. Barnum had always known bigger was better when it came to the spectacle of the circus world.

Barnum used every aspect of Gilded Age culture to promote his show, and one of these aspects was the popular concept of racial inferiority. Barnum’s circus “celebrated white bourgeois manhood,” and he attempted to portray race the way in which his mostly white, middle-class audience expected it to be portrayed.³⁷ One of his attractions was a display of cultures across the world, but countries outside the western world were presented as savage and violent. Bluford Adams claims that this display was a sort of catharsis, demonstrating the passion and emotion that westerners traded in for security and peace.³⁸ While Barnum showcased cultures from Turkey to China, they were reduced to specimens of racial inferiority.

One of the best examples of Barnum’s business practicality is his merger with James Bailey in 1881. Bailey’s rival circus competed with Barnum’s throughout much of the 1870s. The two men presented similar attractions and events over the years, but in 1880 Bailey boasted a tremendous

³³ Renoff, *The Big Tent*, 58.

³⁴ Renoff, *The Big Tent*, 63.

³⁵ Bluford Adams, “A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires,” *American Literary History* 8, no 1, (1996), JSTOR, 35.

³⁶ P.T. Barnum, “What the Fair Should Be”, *The North American Review*, no. 400 (1890), *Making of America Journals*, 401.

³⁷ Adams, “Stupendous Mirror”, 35.

³⁸ Adams, “Stupendous Mirror”, 35.

addition to his circus. One of Bailey's elephants, Hebe, gave birth to "Little Columbia," the first elephant born in America. This baby elephant was sure to boost ticket sales to whichever circus possessed her. Barnum recognized this, and was determined to obtain Little Columbia at any cost. Barnum first attempted to purchase Little Columbia for the record sum of \$100,000, but Bailey rejected his offer.³⁹ Bailey too understood the power behind this elephant; he told Barnum he would not part with his prize, no matter the offer. Rather than compete with this new attraction, Barnum decided it was safer and more profitable to merge with Bailey. Along with James L. Hutchinson, they became partners of a new circus, and Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth was born.

Because Barnum and Bailey were each used to running their own show, tempers flared in the beginning. Each man wanted to be in charge. Once this rough patch was settled however, they realized their personalities meshed perfectly, providing two sides to the business coin. Bailey was "squint-eyed, perpetually nervous, pinch-penny, intensely private, fanatical about detail, he was everything the fun-loving, extroverted Barnum wasn't."⁴⁰ Bailey was the level-headed business operator who managed the finances, while Barnum was the risk-taker willing to do anything to put their business in the public eye. Later in life, Barnum stated Bailey was exactly what he was looking for in both a business partner and a friend.⁴¹

In addition to his shrewd, and sometimes questionable, business ethics, Barnum is hailed as one of the best showman of all time. He was in the business of spectacle, and he always aimed to please. If the audience was satisfied with the circus performance they witnessed, and if that satisfaction inspired people to spend more money, Barnum had succeeded. He was, in essence, the Gilded Age personified. The glamour and excitement of Barnum's circus were more important than its substance, and the same was true for the glamour and excitement of Barnum's life.

The title of Barnum's show is a telling feature of just how showy it was, and the way he wanted that showiness to be perceived. The selection of the word 'greatest' in "The Greatest Show on Earth" was no accident. Culhane claims "that superlative meant to Barnum not only the best of everything the circus had exhibited before him . . . but also the exhibition of people and animals who were mysterious deviations from nature's course."⁴² Barnum proclaimed himself the master of the circus through this title, and Culhane says he was simultaneously exalting that which had made him great – the freak show. After all, "at the circus we get to see people and animals that can be rated the largest, the smallest, the fastest, the fattest . . ." and this, to Barnum, was what it was all about.⁴³

Because of Barnum's museum experience, he always sought to incorporate the freak show in his performances. He "all but invented the sideshow," and used it to join every other kind of show that preceded his circus.⁴⁴ Some of his attractions were common freaks, such as the giants or bearded ladies he rotated in and out. Others possessed rarer deformities that made them unique

³⁹ Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 272.

⁴⁰ Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 272.

⁴¹ Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 272.

⁴² Culhane, *American Circus*, 27.

⁴³ Culhane, *American Circus*, 13.

⁴⁴ Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 234.

and special to audiences. One of these rare freaks was Eli Bowen, a man born with feet but no legs. Another was Charles Tripp, an armless boy with the ability to perform many tasks with his feet, such as peeling bananas. Though sword swallowers were fairly common in other circuses, Barnum's "English Jack" was unique because he swallowed frogs and regurgitated them alive. These people, and others just like them, were necessary for Barnum's success. Barnum was always searching for the next great freak.⁴⁵ Barnum called the *American Museum* his "first really successful effort in life", and it was because of these freaks that the museum and his later circus were so successful.⁴⁶

Another aspect of Barnum's great showmanship was the way he presented himself, since Barnum's "fame and fortune were founded on a keen sense of what his audiences wanted."⁴⁷ His life was a performance; there was never a moment when Barnum stepped down from his primary role as showman. He always carefully constructed his image. One of the characteristics of this image was his advertised rags-to-riches success. The Gilded Age was the time of the entrepreneur, and Barnum was aware of the public's fondness for those who started with nothing yet managed to achieve fame and fortune. He stressed the parts of his childhood, such as his father's early death, which confirmed him as a poor, yet driven, American. Barnum also cheerfully adopted the description of humbug and noted his audience expressed "derision and delight at the harmless humbug."⁴⁸ His audience liked to figure out which attractions were part of Barnum's humbuggery, and because they kept coming back for more, Barnum continued this persona. When the public identified him as a humbug, he made sure he was the best humbug the world had ever seen.

Another element of Barnum's character was his claim of commitment to Christian values. Though Barnum embraced his obvious humbuggery, he believed (or wanted his audience to believe) his intentions were always good. Barnum was dedicated to the temperance movement, and in his autobiography, he describes a revelation where he realized drinking was leading him down "a path of wrong-doing, and one which was not only causing great wrong to the community, but was also fraught with imminent danger to myself."⁴⁹ Barnum went home and poured all his champagne on ground. He decided never to drink again, and maintains he stood by that resolution his whole life.

Barnum displayed incredible skills in promoting and running his circus, but the historical context of his rise to fame cannot be forgotten. The rapidly-expanding America provided Barnum with more people to fill his tents. He expected a crowd, regardless of which city he was in. Most people did not yet own a car, so traffic problems were minor and could be resolved quickly. The invention of the automobile caused further problems because people could come to town any day of the year; they did not require the excuse of Circus Day. In Barnum's day, a circus increased a city's business. Every act was new and exciting, but this faded with time. Audiences had seen everything before, and circus proprietors ran out of innovative feats with which to impress them. The atmosphere of the Gilded Age was important as well because people made more money, spent more money, and were ready to be blinded by grandeur. Culhane summed up all these

⁴⁵ Kunhardt, *Greatest Showman*, 234-235.

⁴⁶ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 344.

⁴⁷ Curry, "King of Humbug", 49.

⁴⁸ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 66.

⁴⁹ Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 361.

factors by stating, “Circus Day at the turn of the century involved the whole community in a way that the small size of the average circus had not permitted before, and the sprawling size of towns and cities has not permitted since.”⁵⁰ The time was ripe for the circus spectacle; Barnum happened to be the lucky man presented with the opportunity, and possessed the necessary showman’s attitude, to seize it.

Undeniably Phineas Taylor Barnum was one of the most remarkable public personas of his day. From a young age, he understood the art of money getting.⁵¹ Barnum spent large sums of money on advertising his show, and these ads reaped him even larger rewards. Barnum was a creative and savvy business operator who put his show on the rails and attended to his public’s every concern. He recognized cooperation was sometimes more prudent than competition, and he was not too proud to merge with Bailey. Above all else, Barnum was a showman. He branded himself as a character unlike anything the world had ever seen before. Barnum’s rise to prominence paralleled the rise of the Gilded Age. The spectacle was not only more important than the substance, the spectacle was the substance. Splendor and illusion were the most important part of Barnum’s show and his life. Barnum was a larger-than-life figure who truly created “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

⁵⁰ Culhane, *American Circus*, 163.

⁵¹ *The Art of Money Getting* is the title of one of Barnum’s books.

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The Gilded Age — a term coined by Mark Twain — marked the end of the Civil War and the growth of the nation until the turn of the 20th Century. Come revisit this period as we delve into the politics, people, scandals and entertainment that became synonymous with the time. Activity Level. Discuss politics in the Gilded Age, including the ballot controversy of the 1876 election, two presidential assassinations and a Congress known for its tobacco-filled halls and spittoons. Explore the artwork of the late 1800s, including the collections of two "robber baron" type industrialists, Harry Clay Frick and Louisine and Harry Havemeyer and other American artists with their society portraits.